

EARLY SULTANS OF DELHI AND THE CALIPHS*

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In the world of Islam the institution of Caliph has always had a place of great reverence. Once the supreme temporal and religious head of the Muslims, their power began declining with the rise of new monarchies in Turko-Arab countries. In AH 602 (AD 1236) the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate was laid by Qutub-ud-din-Aibak. The early Sultans of Delhi thought it prudent to use the name of the Caliph on their coin as a shield to protect themselves from the rival claimants and contenders of the sovereignty; as a bait to win over the confidence of the masses and as a talisman to ward off the evil designs of the theologians. Thus, a myth was built up which continued for a long time even after the extinction of the Abbasid Caliphs in AH 656 (AD 1258).

On the basis of the contemporary literary historical sources scholars have analysed various aspects of the relationship between the early Sultans of Delhi and the Caliphate, including its scope, nature, extent, implication upon the sovereignty, etc. Here it is proposed to study this relationship on the basis of coins, a source not properly trodden so far.

Caliph, the *Khalifah*, was "the title given to the successor of Prophet Muhammad, who is vested with absolute authority in all the matters of state, both civil and religious"¹. Al 'Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet, laid the foundation of 'Abbasid Caliphate (AH 132-656/AD 750-1258) which, in course of time, grew into a large empire with its capital at Baghdad. Though the 'Abbasid Caliphs did not enjoy any authority in the west, yet the Muslim countries were connected by such strong ties of common

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1. Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, reprint, New Delhi, 1973, p 263

religion and common culture that their inhabitants regarded themselves as citizens of the vast empire of which Mecca was the religious and Baghdad the cultural and political centre. In the beginning, the domain of the Caliphate was administered by provincial governors who acted as representatives of the Caliph. Later, as the Caliphate disintegrated in the 3rd century of Islam, its provincial governors began to assert their independence. The tenure of power of these neo-rulers was based on force and circumstances. They, however, considered it diplomatically beneficial not to break their relations with Caliph. The Caliph's recognition of their sovereignty provided them with moral support to win over the confidence of their masses.

As the formal recognition of their authority, these kings received from Caliph a patent of investiture called *Manshur*, the robe of honour, turban and sword, etc., called *Khil'at*, alongwith Caliphal insignia (*Liwa*) and other gifts called *Karamat*. In turn, they were obliged to recognize the Caliph as the head of their empire and to return the envoy laden with lavish gifts for the Caliph.

Early Sultans (AH 602-688 / AD 1206-1290)

In AH 602 / AD 1206 when Muhammad Ghori died without leaving any male issue, his empire of Ghazna and Hindustan passed on to the hands of his slaves who are known as *Mu'izzi Maliks* (*Maliks* or Chiefs of Mu'iz-ud-din).

Qutb ud din Aibak (AH 602-607 / AD 1206-1210)

Aibak succeeded to Muhammad Ghori's Indian territories. Literary sources inform us that he issued coins in his own name². But only a few copper coins, with inscription *Al Qutbi*, are attributed to him³.

2. Minhaj-us-Siraj, *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* (hereinafter abbreviated as *TN*), Eng. trans. H. G. Raverty, vol. 1, p. 528; *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* quoted in *TN*, 1, p. 525 (fn); an anonymous work quoted by Raverty in his translation (*TN*, 1, p. ? fn) gives the description of Qutb-ud-din Aibak's coins as follows:

Obv: Sikkah Wans-ul-Mulk-o-Nakin-i-Sultan Qutb-ud-din Aibak Fi Sanah 603.
[Coin of the inheritor of the Kingdom and the signet of the Sultan, Qutb ud din Aibak, (in the) year AH 603].

Aram Shah (AH 607 / AD 1210)

No coins of Aibak's successor, Aram Shah, were known till recently. Hull in his *Guide* has now listed a copper coin bearing the figure of Horseman on the obverse and on the reverse the legend *Abu'l Muzaffar Aram Shah al-Sultan* (Father of Victory Sultan Aram Shah)⁴.

Both the first two Sultans of Delhi were short-lived and their reigns too were not peaceful; so, quite possibly, they could not have any chance to seek the 'legal sanction' of their authority from the Caliph.

Shams-ud-din Iltutmish (AH 607-33 / AD 1210-36)

The successor of Aram Shah was Iltutmish, who was not only an able army commander but also an efficient administrator. After overcoming the internal hostilities of Turkish and *Qutbi Maliks* (*Maliks* or Chiefs of Qutb-ud-din), Iltutmish consolidated his sovereign position as Sultan of Delhi by having an investiture from Al-Mustansir Billah (AH 623-40 / AD 1226-42), the 'Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad⁵. The literary sources are not clear if Iltutmish

Rev: Zarb Dar-al-Khilafah Delhi Jalus [Struck at Delhi, the Abode of the Caliph, in the Regnal year ----]

The source of information of the author of the anonymous work quoted by Raverty is not known. But it is quite apparent that it would have been written very late in the Mughal times. It is well-known that the reverse formula attributed to Qutb-ud-din Aibak's coin had not come into vogue for about 300 years after the advent of the Mughals.

3. H. Nelson Wright, *The Coinage and Metrology of the Sultans of Delhi*, Delhi, 1936, pp. 14-15, coin nos. 49 b-e.

But the use of the word *al-Qutbi* does not necessarily mean that it was used exclusively for Qutb-ud-din Aibak. This epithet is well-known for Iltutmish on the coins issued from Gaur (Bengal), Nelson Wright, *op.cit.*, p.15, coin nos. 49 f, p.16, coin no.49H,49J, etc. It is more likely that these coins were related to him.

4. Donald B. Hull, *Collector's Guide to Muhammadan Coins of India, 1200 AD to 1860 AD Book I: Sultans of Delhi*, p. 32, coin no. 38; Edward Thomas, had published a similar coin in his *The Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi*, London, 1871, (p. 40), but it was later attributed to Mu'iz-ud-din Bahram Shah by Nelson Wright (*op.cit.*, p. 46, coin nos. 184-187).
5. *TN*, 1, p. 616; Mohammed Qasim Farishta, *Tarikh-i-Farishta* (hereinafter abbreviated as *TF*), Eng. trans. John Briggs, vol 1, p. 118; Abdul Qadir Badayuni in his *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* (hereinafter abbreviated as *MT*), Eng. trans. G.S.A. Ranking, reprint Delhi 1986, vol. 1, p. 94, says that, "Arab ambassadors

had sought this investiture or the Caliph had any such policy of his own. But the fact is that Iltutmish was overwhelmed at the receipt of the Caliphal investiture⁶. In a General Assembly summoned on 23rd Rabi I, AH 626 (19 February AD 1229) to welcome the Caliphal emissaries in Delhi, he declared that he was confirmed by the Caliph in possession "of all the land and sea which he had conquered"⁷.

The coins of Iltutmish show that even before the arrival of Caliphal investiture, he had acknowledged the Caliphal overlordship to some extent. His earliest coins bear the date AH 614 / AD 1218 and on these he calls himself *Burhan-i-Amir-ul-Mominin* (A prince of the commander of the Faithfuls, i.e. the Caliph) (Fig. 1).

His coins, mostly dated AH 622 / AD 1125, bear the name of reigning Caliph Al-Nasir-ud-din Ilah (AH 575-622 / AD 1180-1225). On these coins the Sultan styles himself *Yamin-ul-Khalifah* (right hand of the Caliph), a title indicative of his closer relationship with the Caliph⁸ (Fig. 2).

After the death of Caliph Al-Nasir-ud-din Ilah in AH 622 / AD 1225, his name was replaced by that of the succeeding Caliph Al-Zahir Bamar Ilah (AH 622-23 / AD 1225-26)⁹. On these coins Iltutmish adorns himself with the title *Nasir-i-Amir-ul-Mominin* (Helper of the Commander of the Faithful) (Fig. 3).

In AH 626 / AD 1229, Iltutmish received the investiture from the Caliph Al-Mustansir Billah, who had succeeded Al-Zahir in AH 622 / AD 1225. The occasion was marked by issuing coins bearing the *Kalimah* — the Muslim religious dictum of Faith —

the Ubaidi-Isma'ili Caliphate of Egypt had already terminated in AH 567 / AD 1171.

- 6 "Out of joy at this (arrival of investiture), they built triumphal arches in the city and held banquets", *MT*, 1, p. 94.
7. Hasan Nizami, *Taj-ul-Ma'asir*, quoted in Elliot and Dowson, *History of India as told by its own Historians*, 3, London, p. 243.
8. Besides coins, Iltutmish has also used this title (*Yamin-i-Khalifah*) in the inscriptions on the third storey of the Qutb Minar, see Thomas, *op cit*, pp. 50-51.
9. The known specimens in the name of Al-Zahir are, however, dated AH 624 / AD 1227.

and the name and the title of the Caliph *Al-Imam-Al-Mustansir Amir-ul-Mominin* (the *Imam* Al-Mustansir, Commander of the Faithful), so much so as to exclude the Sultan's name from his own coins. Unfortunately published specimens of this type of coins do not reveal the date(*Fig. 4*).

Later, Iltutmish included his name in the coin-legend. The earliest published specimen of this type is dated AH 628 / AD 1230-31 and was issued from Delhi mint. (*Fig. 5*). On this coin Iltutmish calls himself *Al-Sultan-Al-A'zam* (the Great Sultan). On another specimen, he calls himself simply *Al-Sultan-Al-Mu'azzam* (the Mighty Sultan) and bears the old title of *Nasir-i Amir-ul-Mominin* (helper of the Commander of the Faithful) (*Fig. 6*).

Thomas read the date on this coin as AH 632 / AD 1234-35¹⁰, but the occurrence of *Al-Mu'azzam* on it undoubtedly places it before the other clearly dated specimen of AH 628 / AD 1230-31 mentioned above (see *Fig. 5*).

All the gold and silver coins issued by Iltutmish, whether in the name of Caliph or otherwise, universally bear the *Kalimah*. The only exception is the silver *tankah* issued from Delhi mint in AH 632 / AD 1234-35; it bears only the name and the titles of the Caliph and the Sultan (*Fig. 7*).

On the billon coinage of Iltutmish the name of the Caliph is inscribed in Devanagari script, viz., *Mustansiri Amir-li-Momina* (Mustansir, the Commander of the Faithful) on the obverse and *Sri Khalifah* (the Honourable Caliph) on the reverse (*Fig. 8*).

On another group of billon coins, that 'mark the succeeding stage' of Caliphal commemorative coinage, the legend is less eulogistic (*Fig. 9*).

By inscribing the name and the titles of the Caliph in Devanagari characters, Iltutmish probably intended 'to convey to his Indian

10. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 52, coin no. xxxix

subjects, in their own script and language, the title and designation of the supreme pontif of their conqueror's faith¹¹.

Rukn-ud-din Firoz Shah I (AH 633-34 / AD 1235-36)

Illutmish's successor was Rukn-ud-din Firoz Shah. His coins are known only in silver and billon; and only on his silver *tankahs* we find Caliphal signatures. The name of Caliph Al-Mustansir continued to appear on silver coins all through his brief reign of seven months.

On the coins of the earlier period of his reign, mostly dated in AH 633 / AD 1235, the name of the Sultan is inscribed without any Caliphal titles whatsoever (Fig. 10). But on the coins of the subsequent year dated in AH 634 / AD 1236, the Caliphal title *Nasir-i-Amir-ul-Mominin* is added to the legend and is inscribed on the reverse in four segments. Billon coins of Rukn-ud-din Firoz Shah are without Caliph's name or titles (Fig. 11).

Jalalat-ud-din Razia (AH 634-37 / AD 1236-40)

Razia did not make any change in the existing coinage. The name of Caliph, Al-Mustansir, was retained on her silver coins¹². For herself she uses the title of *Nusrat-Amir-ul-Mominin* [Helper (feminine) of the Commander of the Faithful] (Fig. 12). Billon and copper coins of Razia do not reveal any sign of Caliphal supremacy.

Mu'iz-ud-din Bahram Shah (AH 637-39 / AD 1240-42)

Bahram Shah followed the coinage pattern of his predecessors. His silver coins bear the name of the Caliph Al-Mustansir. The old Caliphal title of *Nasir-i-Amir-ul-Mominin* adorns name of the Sultan (Fig. 13). The billon coins of Bahram Shah bear neither the name of the Caliph nor the Caliphal titles for the Sultan.

'Ala-ud-din Mas'ud Shah (AH 639-44 / AD 1242-46)

Mas'ud Shah revived certain earlier practices of his grandfather Illutmish. On his gold and silver coins he inscribed the ruling

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

12. The gold coins of this ruler are not known.

Caliph's complete name, viz. *Al-Mustansir Billah* (literally "Seeker of the Divine Help") (Fig. 14).

In AH 640 / AD 1242 Al-Mustansir was succeeded by Caliph Al-Must'asim (AH 640-56 / AD 1242-58). The name of the new Caliph replaced the older one on the coins of Mas'ud Shah. The earliest coin of this type is dated in AH 641 / AD 1243 (Fig. 15). Mas'ud Shah followed his grandfather in striking Caliphal coins in billon (Fig. 16). Strikingly, Mas'ud Shah did not use any Caliphal title for himself on his coins.

Nasir-ud-din Mahmud I (AH 644-64 / AD 1246-66)

Nasir-ud-din Mahmud struck coins in gold and silver with the name of the Caliph Al-Must'asim (Fig. 17), without any Caliphal titles for himself.

The house of 'Abbasid Caliphs at Baghdad was extinguished in AH 656 / AD 1258 when the Mongol leader Halaku Khan murdered Al-Must'asim. But the name of the murdered Caliph Al-Must'asim continued to appear on the coins of Nasir-ud-din Mahmud as evidenced by the coins dated AH 658-664.

The belief that retention of the name of the dead Caliph on coins of Delhi Sultans was due to their ignorance of the great cataclysm at Baghdad is unacceptable. Minhaj in very explicit terms says "through trusted sources it was learnt that on Wednesday the 9th Muharram (AH 656 = 19 January AD 1258), Halaku Khan, the leader of the Mongols, had defeated Amir-ul-Mominin Al-Must'sim Billah in Baghdad"¹³. A large number of refugees of the house of 'Abbas had found shelter in Delhi during the reigns of Nasir-ud-din Mahmud and Balban. Inscribing the name of the last Caliph on their coins only means that these Sultans had proclaimed their allegiance to the Caliphal association.

Ghiyas-ud-din Balban (AH 664-86 / AD 1266-87)

Balban restructured the coin-legend at the very beginning of his reign (Fig. 18). He omitted the word *Fi ahd* (during the reign of)

13. TN, Vs. 225, see S.A.A. Rizvi, *Khilji Kalin Bharat*, Aligarh, p. 54.

prefixed to the name of the Caliph, and used since the time of Iltutmish¹⁴. However, the name of the martyred Caliph Al-Must'asim continued to appear on the coins all along his reign.

Mu'iz ud din Kaiqubad (AH 686-89 / AD 1287-90) and Shams-ud-din Kayumars (AH 689 / AD 1290)

These succeeding Sultans continued to pay numismatic homage to the non-existent Caliph. All their coins bear the legend *Al-Imam al-Must'asim Amir-ul-Mominin* (the Imam Al Must' asim, the commander of the Faithful) on the obverse and the name and titles of the Sultan on the reverse. (*Figs. 19 and 20*).

The practice of adorning the name of the Sultan with Caliphal titles was now only a traditional boasting rather than an epithet having any meaning or significance. However, the striking of the Caliphal coins, even after their extinction, indicates the extent of importance attached to the Caliph's association by the Sultans of Delhi.

'Ala-ud-din-Mas'ud Shah was the first to throw away this boastful pretence and thereafter none of his successors — Nasir-ud-din Mahmud Shah, Ghiyas-ud-din Balban, Mu'iz-ud-din Kaiqubad, Shams-ud-din Kayumars — used any Caliphal titles for themselves¹⁵. Likewise, none of them except 'Ala-ud-din Mas'ud have struck any Caliphal coins even in the baser metals, viz. billon and copper.

A question is frequently posed as to whether the Caliphal recognition made the Sultanate of Delhi subservient to the Caliphs. Amongst the early Sultans of Delhi, only Iltutmish had received Caliphal recognition and was the first Sultan to associate the name of the 'Abbasid Caliphs on his coins. Right from the time of Alptigin and Mahmud of Ghazna, the Sultans

14. Recently few silver *tankahs* issued from Lakhnauti mint have come to light with the old legend prefixed with *Fi ahd* (Dilip Rajgor, *Standard Catalogue of Sultanate Coins of India*, Bombay, 1991, p. 67, Type 939). It is quite likely that a few coins might have been struck with the old coin-legend at this distant mint, before new orders dropping the prefix *Fi ahd* were implemented.

15. It should be noted that of all the early Sultans of Delhi, only Iltutmish had actually received the investiture from the Caliph.

had liaison with Caliphs. This allegiance gave the Sultans the status of honour in the Muslim world and it also satisfied the formalities of Muslim convention. Furthermore, the inclusion of Caliph's name in the *Khutbah* (Friday mass prayers) and *Sikkah* (coins) endeared the Sultan to his Muslim subjects. On the other end, it bestowed on the Caliphs prestige and wealth. The benefits of this alliance were immense; so the link was maintained. By invoking Caliphal blessings Iltutmish was able to consolidate his authority as the ruler of a newly conquered territory.

Yet it is difficult to endorse the views of A.B.M. Habibullah that "by receiving a formal investiture from Mustansir Billah, Iltutmish made the Delhi Sultanate a direct vassal (of the Caliphate)"¹⁶ or agree with I.H. Qureshi that "no area where the Caliph was recognised could be legally independent. Even the rulers of states on whom he (the Caliph) was politically dependent were legally subordinate to him. *De jure* he was the sovereign, no one could rule without his consent"¹⁷. Arnold¹⁸, Aziz Ahmad¹⁹, and other scholars have also advocated the same view. But overall evaluation of the numismatic data discussed above reveals that the early Sultans of Delhi used the name of the Caliph merely as 'talisman' to serve their own political ends. Their coinage amply testifies the conventionalised and traditionalised use of the Caliphal titles and Caliph's name. The presence of the 'non-existent' Caliph on the coins of Nasir-ud-din Mahmud and his successors was nothing else but the currency conservatism, of which there are numerous instances. That the Caliph was never regarded as source of sanction of the authority of the Sultans may further be illustrated by the following examples:

- (i) Iltutmish, the first Sultan of Delhi to receive the investiture from the 'Abbasid Caliph, did not hesitate to attack and subjugate Ghiyas-ud-din 'Iwaz of Bengal, who had also received a similar robe of honour from the Caliph.

16. A.B.M. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, 3rd edition, Allahabad, 1976, p. 233.

17. I. H. Qureshi, *The Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi*, Lahore, 1944, p. 25.

18. T. W. Arnold, *The Caliphate*, reprint, London, 1965.

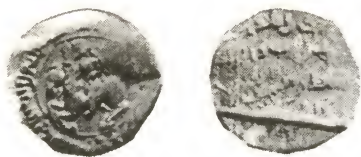
19. Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Oxford, 1964, p. 11.

- (ii) Halaku Khan was the Mongol invader who had destroyed the house of 'Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad and had murdered the Caliph in AH 656 / AD 1258, yet when his emissaries visited India in AH 658 / AD 1260, they were given a rousing welcome by the Sultan Nasir-ud-din Muhmud²⁰, whose coins still had the name of the dead Caliph Al-Must'asim.

These clearly show that the early Sultans of Delhi gave prime importance to their political needs over the religious sentiments. In continuously proclaiming themselves the 'Lieutenant of the Commander of the Faithful', they simply commemorated the glorious past of the Turks, when the Caliphate depended on their support. The proclamation of the early Sultans of Delhi was in no way any recognition of the Caliph as the fountain-head of the authority of the Sultans. To sum up, it may be said that the extra-territorial allegiance to the Caliph provided a strong moral basis to their political power.

20. *TN*, (Vs. 314), quoted in S.A.A. Rizvi, *Adi Turk Kalina Bharat*, Aligarh, 1956, p. 94; Elliot and Dowson, *op.cit.*, 2, pp. 382-83.

1. Iltutmish, AV, AH 614 Nelson Wright (NW) p. 15, Coin No. 49 G.



2. Iltutmish, AV, AH 622NW, p. 17, Coin No. 49 L



3. Iltutmish, AR, AH 624NW, p. 17, Coin Nos. A-B



4. [Iltutmish], AR, AH XNW, p. 18, Coin No. 50 C



5. Iltutmish, AR, 628NW, p. 19, Coin No. 50 F



6. Iltutmish, AR, 632 ?NW, p. 19, Coin No. 50 D



7. Iltutmish, AR, [Delhi], [AH 632]NW, p. 20, Coin No. 52



8. Iltutmish, Billon, xNW, p. 26, Coin Nos. 68-72



9. Iltutmish, Billon, xNW, p. 26, Coin Nos. 73-76



10. Ruknuddin Firoz Shah, AR, Delhi, AH 633 NW, p. 38, Coin No. 153 D



11. Ruknuddin Firoz Shah, AR, [Delhi], [AH 632] NW, p. 38, Coin No. 154 A.



12. Razia, AR, [Delhi], AH 635NW, p. 40 Coin Nos. 161-161D



13. Balram Shah, AR, [Delhi], AH 638 pp. 43-44, Coin Nos. 172-172b



18. Balban, AV, Delhi, A. H. 671 NW, p. 58, Coin No. 240.



19. Muizuddin Kaiqubad, AR, Delhi, NW, p. 63, Coin No. 257.



20. Shamsuddin Kayumass, AR, Delhi, NW, p. 66, Coin No. 279.

